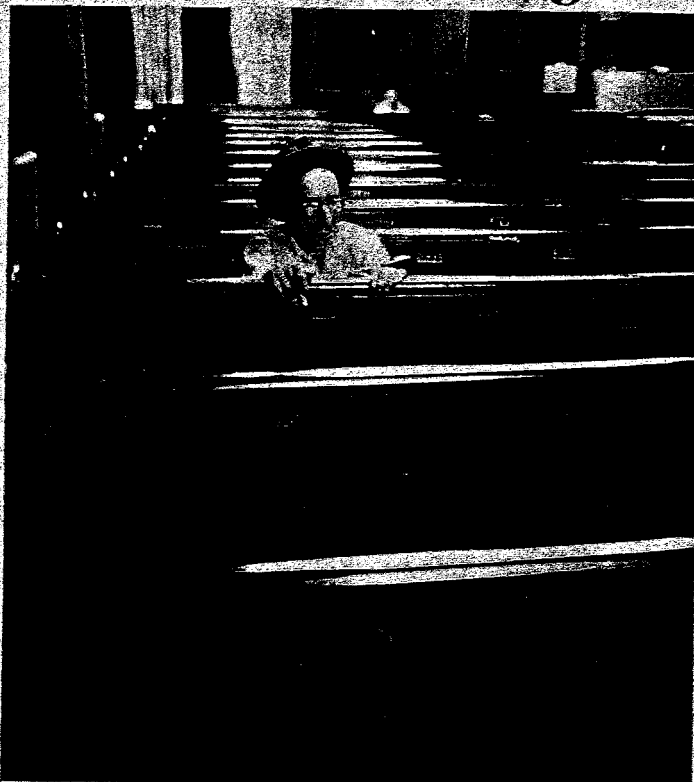


The Disappearing World of a New York Jew



"Someday, perhaps, the Jews will come back to our synagogues." Harry Kirschner goes on, 86 and almost alone.

DEATH IS A SLOW INTRUDER. Even to the man who falls dead in midstride, it began—when? When an artery wall began to thicken? When a virus became implanted? On the day he left his mother's body? Death, to a synagogue, comes slowly too. And who knows its visit? A man dies. A family moves. A son forgets. Suddenly, the seats, once filled twice daily, grow thick with dust. And only the old people are left. A neighborhood has changed.

The decay of New York's tenemented South Bronx laps at the Intervale Jewish Center: dog droppings on the front steps, a chalked "Jews next" on the sidewalk, the vacant stares of neighbors as they

walk by. A small group of the Jewish elderly—their number swelling briefly as survivors straggle in from deserted synagogues nearby, diminishing as others move—holds out against the tide.

The South Bronx, like Harlem and Brownsville, is the newly abandoned intersection that paths which began in Europe touched briefly before radiating toward Westchester, Long Island, Connecticut. After a quarter-century in the Bronx, Harry Kirschner, 86, falteringly old, ill, introduced to flight as a police-beaten boy of 14 in Russia, refuses to move again.

The first time I saw him, he was wheeling a once-elegant high-bodied pram—the kind associated with the east side of Central Park and snobbish governesses—through the garbage-thick streets, a slight,

continued

BY CHARLES MANGEL
LOOKS EDITOR

voices faded away as elderly men found it difficult to face both the night and the worry of the streets. A membership list, mainstay of any organization, no longer exists. Any Jew who comes to intervals to pray is a member for as long as he wishes to be one.

Harry Kirschner, perhaps alone, somehow hopes for renewal. During services one day, he noticed a pile of rubbish stacked in the back of the sanctuary, and asked about it. One of the members laughed: "Dirt, you say. We have no members, and you worry about a little dirt. Get the members, and we'll clean up the dirt."

Harry said nothing, but appeared the next morning with a mop and a bucket. It was a scorching Sunday in August. The old man carried water and bucket and mop, scrubbed the floor of the 500-seat room and lugged out the waste piles.

He worries about the present. He need only lift his head a little to see the irreversible future: a block away sits the abandoned, torn Netzach Israel Jewish Center and Beth Jacob School for Girls. There, the struggle ended four years ago.

Of the three original Stars of David mounted on stemlike pedestals on the roof of Netzach Israel, only two remain upright. When I was there, a little Negro boy climbed up on the narrow ledge that held the stars, wrapped his legs around the stem of one of them, sat down and began methodically to rock the star back and forth. He pushed and pulled rhythmically, patiently, for more than half an hour. The thin metal gave slowly at first, then more easily. When the stem finally snapped, and the Star of David, almost as tall as the boy, fell backward into his lap, he scampered up, shrugged it from his legs and ran off, leaving the shiny, broken star.

HE SKIPPED ACROSS the roof, grabbed a pipe and slid down to the street. He looked up and smiled cheerfully as I walked over to him. "Why did you break that star?" "Nobody in that building," he replied. "Do you know who was in there?" "Sure. Some kinda church." He raced off, his flashy sneakers kicking through a pile of smashed glass on the front steps.

The building's small, tiled entry foyer was awash in debris. A boy-sized prayer shawl lay on the floor with toilet paper crumbled on top of it. Shredded books covered half the area. One was open to the "Laws of Grace."

A framed photograph of 21 young girls in starched white dresses ("Beth Jacob's First Graduating Class" the legend on it read) was flanked by an opened, but immaculate, beer can and a white skullcap inscribed "Wedding reception, Ruth and Harold Rabinovich, June 9, 1954." A sneaker imprint made the name hard to read.

The basement schoolrooms were demolished. The individual wooden desks were lopsided, thrown, ripped. A heavy bookcase had been pulled away from the wall and dumped onto the floor, its contents scattered. Empty beer cans and fragments of small wine bottles intermingled with religious articles of every description. A book of receipts on the floor reported that on January 31, 1963, Mrs. S. Katz had donated \$12 to the school. Eighteen in Hebrew means *chey-lif*. Through holes in a window, the voices of children, playing happily and talking in Spanish, drifted in.

A stained glass window overlooking the main sanctuary of Netzach Israel had been broken by rocks hurled from the street. It was a memorial win-

continued



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LOOK 2-4-69 69

One old man waits to pray in a synagogue built for 500

bent, Orthodox Jew looking for the minutiae of junk that provided his living.

Alone and uncomprehending in a community that had passed him, he clung desperately to what he knew, still working and still praying to the one God he was introduced to 80 winters before in a small, bare iceberg of a Hebrew school.

His dreams have altered many times since then, but his God remains constant, the only constant he has ever known. Encroaching blindness and the pleas of his wife have since forced him to stop maneuvering his pram through the vicious traffic of city streets. His synagogue is his last stronghold.

So he sits, alone on a synagogue bench built for seven, and he waits, hopefully, for nine more men to come so Sabbath prayers can begin.

The battle for survival that Jews have fought so many times is now being lost in the South Bronx. Of 24 Orthodox synagogues in the immediate area, only Intervale, one of the plainest, is still open. The closest active one is about a mile away, a long walk for an aging Orthodox Jew who will not ride on the Sabbath or major holy days.

The change has been swift. The Bronx, once a kind of material new Jerusalem for Jews, is a haven no longer.

"When we moved here in 1940," Harry Kirschner remembers, "we couldn't find two empty seats for Yom Kippur. There were *schuls* [synagogues] everywhere we looked."

A meeting called recently of those who pray at

Intervale drew five people, three of them women, and the youngest of them 69. Does age no longer collect for fees they will drive away poor worshippers; charity has to pay the bills. There is no president, for there is no willing man young enough to take the job. A determined woman, widow of the last president, handles what affairs there are.

"On Simchas Torah," Harry Kirschner says, "you had to get in line to dance with the Torah." (The holiday, "the Rejoicing of the Torah," is the happiest in the Hebrew calendar; it marks the completion of the yearlong reading of the Torah, the five books of Moses, core of Jewish scripture, and the start again at Genesis.) "Officers wore tuxedos to services on the important holidays. We had weddings and bar mitzvahs. Herman Wolk was bar mitzvah'd here. We even danced in the street."

STURPED CARS have claimed the streets around the basement synagogue. Inside, the old flooring is warped and crudely patched in places, prayer shawls are frayed, and the mismatched *siddurim* (prayer books) tell silently of their earlier service in other places, now abandoned. An old, valuable brass "curtain," which divided the men's and women's sections (the sexes pray separately in an Orthodox synagogue), was stolen several years ago; a cheap white-cotton drape makes do.

"Plenty of men and boys came for morning and evening prayers. Who ever thought of hood-

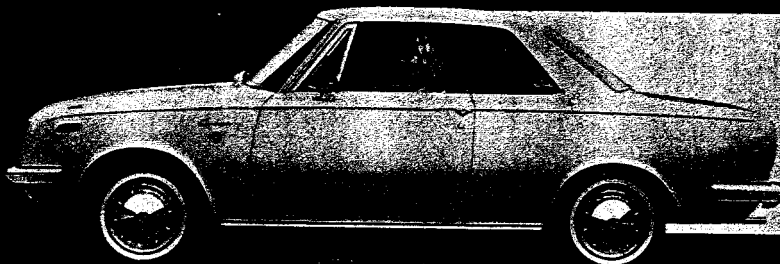
lums here?" Harry Kirschner asks quietly.

Only two police precincts of New York's 77 exceed Intervale for crime. Vandals invaded the synagogue three times the week before the High Holidays in the fall of 1967. Torah scrolls were broken, stripped of their thin silver ornaments and cloth coverings and thrown onto the floor; prayer books and drapes were ripped; and paint was splashed around. Police caught two of the vandals on their way out; one was 13 years old.

Faced by increasing pressures from the neighborhood, a strong group within the synagogue tried five years ago to close the building. Harry Kirschner and others asked a simple question: "What will happen to the Jews who still want to pray?" They won their point.

No community of religious Jews can exist without a synagogue. School and house of worship both (it was born as a school before it made room for the worshippers), the *schul* allows the devout to function. It must be open every day to enable those who can, after morning worship, to pore over the law. It allows the pious, given a *minyan*, the quorum of ten needed for formal prayer, to read the Torah and say the memorial *Kaddish* for those close kin who have died.

The children's school at Intervale went first. By 1964, the congregation could no longer afford a full-time rabbi, and decided to hire one just for the holidays. By last year, that job was turned over to an itinerant cantor. Morning and evening ser-



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DISAPPEARING WORLD

CONTINUED

In their anguish, the victims victimize



In closed, and
vandalized, Netzach
Israel, a trail of
toilet paper at left
runs the length
of the sanctuary.

Now, and enough remained of the hand-painted lettering to read: "In memory of Leib and Dora Phillips—Died November 15, 1924. Died March 19, 1929." I turned and walked out of the building. A man passed as I stood on the steps. "What did you go in there for?" he demanded. "Jews go in there."

Netzach Israel barely achieved its 50th anniversary. Founded in 1908 in a small Bronx store, it moved into its synagogue in 1926. By 1953, the change in the neighborhood had begun to make itself felt. Children pounded on the front door during services. Members were pushed and pelted on the street. The building was broken into so frequently that bars were put on the windows. The synagogue's sisterhood and ladies' auxiliary changed their meetings to the daytime. Evening attendance at services ended. Six years ago, the Beth Jacob School moved. In 1965, the synagogue closed.

The ebb and flow of communities is being repeated in the South Bronx, as elsewhere, perhaps for the final time. The never-ending movement of ethnic groups—Irish, Italians, Jews, Germans—may now, with the coming of the new black and Puerto Rican immigrants, be ending.

The "melting-pot" description given our country (by a foreigner, incidentally) was never more than a pleasant lie. Like clutched to like, and within the cities, ghettos, neighborhoods and communities were born—as isolated, and as fearful, as any in other lands.

In the South Bronx, whites, Negroes, Puerto Ricans pass each other and look the other way. There is talk without contact. Substitute Swede for Jew and Slovak for Negro: the dreadful ballet of separation has not changed.

The story is told in Jewish literature of Rabbi Hillel, sage of the generation before Christ, challenged by an idolater one day to tell him all about Judaism in the brief minutes the questioner could stand on one foot. Hillel replied: "What is hateful to

thee, do not do unto thy fellowman. This is the whole law. The rest is mere commentary."

The ethic still eludes men, but the realization that hateful things ultimately become hateful to all parties may be surfacing. And the now-macabre choreography of the slums could be peering its climactic convulsion. For when the hopeless newcomers, strangers in a sick city and simultaneously aggressors and aggrieved, flail out madly, they either drown or someone must help them.

The latest series of church desecrations in the Bronx (in six months, 68 houses of worship vandalized; as many as 47 Christian churches, 21 synagogues) underscores the isolation of millions in the city. Isolation drives its victims to victimize. The child picked up by the police on his way out of the Intervale synagogue was Puerto Rican. A week later and not too far away, a small race war left two Puerto Ricans and two Negroes dead.

A doctor experienced in a South Bronx emergency ward wrote a medical paper and referred almost parenthetically to "one of the bloodiest civilian battlefields of the Northeast." The paper dealt with expedient methods of caring for knife wounds of the chest and abdomen.

The Jews of Intervale are dying. But then, the South Bronx is dying. The anguish of the city misses few. A black mother walks her three children to and from school every day for fear they will otherwise meet a drug addict. Mrs. Perez sends her honor-student son off to fifth grade in the morning and finds him, at luncheon, dead in an abandoned car behind her home. A departing guardian of the Intervale synagogue, who finally gives up and moves to New Jersey, brings the keys of the building to Harry Kirschner's home and, weeping, pleads: "Please, take care of the school." And Harry Kirschner, a gentle, kind, believing man, scrubs a synagogue and waits for worshippers who will never come back.

END